THE WHOLE WORLD'S SEASONING
McCormick Theological Seminary

October 22, 2007

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Isaiah 58: 6-9 a
Matthew 5: 13-16

One of the great historic puzzles in the human story is how the movement that began in a remote Roman province around the year 30 in the Common Era, a movement begun by a handful of zealous followers of Jesus of Nazareth, became the official religion of Rome and most of the known world in less than three centuries.

The question is posed in a book by Michael Walsh, a British Jesuist, a few years ago: *The Triumph of the Meek: Why Early Christianity Succeeded.* Here's how Walsh frames it:

"On the face of it, Christianity had little to commend it. It sprang from an insignificant corner of the empire . . . Its roots lay in the despised Judaism, and its founder had been executed by that most demeaning of deaths, crucifixion. It had, at least at first, attracted the least influential members of society, and it had been attacked in polemical tracts and held up to ridicule by some of the empire's best writers. Christianity presents the historian with something of a paradox . . ." (p. 11).

The puzzle is more than academic for those of us who still love the old institution — which everyone agrees is in a bit of trouble these days. We live in a time when the future of the church, particularly our branch and style of it, seems to be in doubt. And we live in a culture that seems increasingly indifferent, not hostile particularly, just indifferent: a culture, the sociologists and analyzers of cultural trends keep telling us — is best described by two "isms" — secularism and consumerism to which it is totally

committed and which is not, and never has been, the church's agenda. And so, more so than at any time in centuries Christianity and the Church are a kind of counter-culture.

If you need an illustration of consumerism, leaf through the slick ads in *The New Yorker, Vanity Fair, Oprah's Magazine,* and exegete the message, the lavish eschatological promises that the right car, wristwatch, suit, jewelry will make you happy, free and content. I think it was an ad for Hummer — which is my candidate for the product that most eloquently represents a consumer culture that has gone a little crazy — "If you want it, you need it" the ad declares.

And if you need an illustration of indifferent secularism, take a walk on the Lakefront on Sunday morning and see what most people are doing with what we always thought was sacred time, time that belonged to us. Or sit down with the 40ish affluent post-modern children of a recently departed patriarch to plan the funeral — or "his send-off" as the occasion is occasionally described. What the family wants and needs is a hall big enough to accommodate their guests. You begin by showing them the outline of what usually transpires in a Presbyterian funeral or memorial. They have trouble from the very start — with the name of the event, "Witness to the Resurrection." "Do we need all this religious stuff?" they ask. "We don't like hymns — and keep the Bible stuff short. What we'd like is for three business associates to talk about what Dad meant to them and to the community, a couple of Eric Clapton songs and maybe you could give a little prayer at the end."

Walter Brueggemann adds to the cultural agenda of consumerism, secularism, national security, the National Security State based on industrial militarism, the new state we live in since 9/11 with the politicians' relentless mantra that we will do whatever we must, invade whomever we conclude is

dangerous, tap telephones and email, torture our detainees, violating the most precious American principles — in the name of a War on Terror and our National Security.

Facing all of that — and, in addition, a newly invigorated conservatism that has allied itself with right wing political ideology, and a success Gospel that promises that "an awesome God wants you to be wealthy, healthy and successful" — we just might want to pay attention to what those first Christians and their churches did to survive faithfully.

You know the conventional theories: about the time being ripe for a world religion to emerge, the Roman system of roads making it possible for people and ideas to move about: and the empire's needing some kind of spiritual cohesion to keep it from disintegrating. The historians who advance those theories do not mention the possibility that God knew all that, and decided that it was the right time to make a move.

But there was something else going on — and it was, I propose, the life lived by those early Christians. People saw them — saw what they did in the world — saw their compassion and love and their inclusive hospitality and listened to what they had to say . . .

Christians, Michael Walsh says, exhibited a new and admirable and compelling morality — The Triumph of the Meek.

It is deep in our tradition, in the great prophetic literature of Judaism, — faithfulness to God is evidenced not so much in ritual and law and sacrifice — but in

sharing bread with the hungry
loosing the bonds of injustice
bringing the homeless poor into your house

clothing the naked.

Do that, the prophet promised, and “your light shall break like the dawn.”

What has compelled me about Christianity over the years are the lives of Christians deeply involved in and committed to justice, compassion, kindness in the world. Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Desmund Tutu.

Somewhere long ago someone told me Christian faith calls us away from this world, away from free scientific inquiry into creation and how we got here and came to be who we are, which, someone tried to tell me, represented a threat to Christian truth, and away from the simple pleasures of this world, and certainly away from pleasures of the flesh, however you wish to define that and which were something of a priority at the time.

It was a revelation to me when I met a college professor who visited our freshman dorm once a week and seemed to take equal pleasure in the philosophic arguments of Søren Kierkegaard, a well-turned double play, and a fine cigar. I thought God’s love in Jesus Christ called me to go to a lot of prayer meetings, not baseball games — and it was a great relief and comfort to me.

Another revelation and conversion came when I met the late Joseph Sittler, who taught theology at the University of Chicago, and here — and was a presence around Lutheran School of Theology in his last years, planting trees on the campus and in the courtyard.

Sittler loved God — and language, and great literature which he could quote extensively — and poetry and music and played the French horn. The

Gospel of Jesus Christ seemed to make him more — not less — human, more — not less — alive.

One of my favorite Sittler essays is *Polish Sausage, St. Augustine and the Moral Life*. Sittler recalls the vending trucks that pulled up in front of the University administration building every day at noon and whose specialty was sausage he describes as "rich, juicy, odorous, garlic-laden, hot and smelly with all the herb-subtlety of a thousand years of Polish sausage culture." The effect, Sittler said, was to "bring tears to the eyes, a clutch to the throat, and clarity to the mind." One day he met a professor at the Medical School in line — "'Dr. Platz! What are you doing here? You are a pathologist: you know very well you ought not to eat one of these violent things. I'm only a theologian and I don't know any better. But you are a doctor — and you have professionally examined the catastrophic effect upon the stomach of these explosive, corrosive sausages.' Charles Platz fixed me with a cool gaze," Sittler remembers: "'Yes,' he said, 'you are quite right. But these things are very good, aren't they?'" (*Grace Notes and Other Fragments*, p. 74-75).

Christian faith is winsome when it is witnessed in lives made more human because of it, in love for the world, made more passionate, in commitment to justice, and compassion and peace — made stronger and braver. And churches — churches are faithful — and compelling — to the degree that they exhibit that same love and passion for the world, and for its justice and compassion and peace.

"You are the salt of the earth" Jesus said. He said it — or some wise editor placed it — in the Sermon on the Mount, immediately following the Beatitudes. It's there — I think — as a kind of corrective to a style of religiosity based on those Beatitudes — a misunderstanding . . . Blessed — How happy — are the poor — the meek — the hungry — the peacemaker —

the persecuted. I've always thought that when the disciples first heard those words they must have said — "You've got to be kidding. Poor people aren't happy. There is nothing happy or blessed about hunger. In fact it's cynical — in light of the thousands of children who die every day of malnutrition even to suggest it. The meek — aren't happy. They lose a lot." Leo Durocher wasn't the first or last social commentator to observe that "nice guys finish last."

One of the first and lasting reactions to Jesus' radical blessings is to head for the monastery where you might have a chance of actually living a life like the Beatitudes . . . .meek, peaceful . . . either literally — which hundreds of thousands did — or figuratively, by backing away from life.

And so it is important that the very next word in that text is — "You are the salt of the earth: but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is good for nothing — but is thrown out and trampled underfoot."

At its best this Reformed/Presbyterian tradition of ours has taken that seriously. John Calvin was, in many ways, a flawed man and leader and magistrate, but he did know that the Gospel of Jesus Christ had to do not only with church orders, but fairness in the marketplace, and the number of hours children could be forced to work, and education for all. He did understand that the church has a divine mandate to live thoroughly in this world, showing the world something of the grace and kindness and gentleness and goodness of God. When refugees from all over Europe were fleeing from persecution to Geneva they were met by Deacons on the road — offering food and clothing and lodging. The first thing they saw and experienced of Calvin's Reformation was human kindness and charity.

It may be that the Presbyterian Church as we know it — will not survive. In fact, the Presbyterian Church and its national structures, which nurtured and inspired me is changing right in front of our eyes. But the very worst thing we can do, I think, is be afraid, and pull in and retreat from the world, and wring our hands about declining membership statistics and invest our resources and energy and imagination and love in marketing and church growth schemes.

We are called by Jesus Christ simply to be Salt of the Earth.

In a provocative little book, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity,* Douglas John Hall observes that the privileged relationship mainline religion has enjoyed with North American culture is now over and it may be the best thing that ever happened to us. We are now free, Hall says, to be the people of God we are called to be.

Martin Marty, in *The Protestant Voice in American Pluralism*, reminds us not to forget who we are, and that our values, however they are represented structurally, are important for the whole society — Marty challenges us to be Stewards of those values:

- diversity
- inclusivity
- hospitality
- freedom of inquiry
- freedom of expression
- justice
- peace

And Walter Brueggemann suggests that we're not dead, just in exile and reminds us that exile is a good and creative place to be.

Someone has calculated that at the current rate of numerical decline, the last living Presbyterian will die somewhere around 2050. I doubt that. But far more to the point, we have a tradition and a mandate to be salt of the earth. Everyone here has exegeted that metaphor hundreds of times — so I don't need to do it again except to say that salt — just a little bit, changes what it touches, preserves, purifies and adds flavor and zest.

I sat in front of the television nightly for a week last month watching Ken Burns' "The War." Brilliant, mesmerizing, deeply moving — and my mind kept drifting to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and what he did.

I pulled *The Cost of Discipleship* down off the shelf.

In a commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, written years before the war, he said, "The disciples must not think only of heaven: they have an earthly task as well." Part of Bonhoeffer's lasting importance is, in part, because he made such an intentional decision to love the world and live thoroughly in it — even the demonic world of Nazi Germany.

He returned to Germany, from the safety of Union Seminary and cast his lot with the resistance and finally a conspiracy to assassinate Adolph Hitler, was arrested and executed.

His prison letters are precious — and so very important theologically.

He wrote to his dear friend pp.225-227):

> "I have come to appreciate the worldliness of Christianity as never before . . . I don't mean the shallow this-worldliness of the comfortable. It's something much more profound than that: something in which the knowledge of death and resurrection is ever present. I am still discovering that it is only by living

> completely in this world that one learns to believe. I am glad I have been able to learn it, and know I could only have done so along the road I traveled. Goodbye. Take care of yourself and don't lose hope. We shall all meet again soon."

Jesus Christ calls his people to become seasoning for the whole world. The promise is fullness of life, "the life that is really life," St. Paul called it: lively, passionate, complete life, life as God created it to be.

You — whoever you are, whatever you do professionally, vocationally — wherever you are in your journey, still working every day, retired, or somewhere in between — Jesus calls you — me — salt of the earth — you don't ever get to retire from that. It is our vocation . . .the life, every single day of it, to which he calls us.